DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 489 IR 057 760

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TITLE Doing Research Overseas without Tears: Adventures of an Innocent Abroad.
PUB DATE 1999-08-00
NOTE 8p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/060-141e.htm.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Differences; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Students; Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Student Problems
IDENTIFIERS Australia; Thailand

ABSTRACT

This paper shares some of the experiences of the author, a former Ph.D. overseas student from Thailand, during the time she was conducting a research project in Australia. Being abroad for the first time, as well as coming from a culture with different norms, values, languages, beliefs, and ways of life, led to most of her days studying overseas being very challenging. The author hopes that sharing these experiences will be useful for other potential overseas students who are in the same or similar situations to acquaint them with what they may confront so they can lessen or avoid similar problems. Challenges discussed include language barriers, academic problems, cultural problems, financial constraints, and emotional problems. Suggestions are offered for alleviating academic problems (i.e., problems related to conducting the research project), including: thoroughly understanding the research process; making oneself clear and better understanding the research topic; reviewing the literature; writing a mind map; discussing the topic; writing down all ideas; keeping up with what is happening in the profession; catching up with available software packages; and doing other academic projects in between. (MES)

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ED 441 489

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 060-141-E
Division Number: VII
Professional Group: Library Theory and Research
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 141
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

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Doing research overseas without tears: adventures of an innocent abroad

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Abstract

This paper shares some of the experiences encountered by the author, a former Ph.D. overseas student from Thailand during the time she was conducting a research project in Australia. Being abroad for the first time, as well as coming from a different culture, with different norms, values, languages, beliefs, and ways of life, led to most of her studying days overseas being very challenging. The author hopes that sharing these experiences may be useful for other potential overseas students, who are in the same or similar situation, to acquaint them with what they may confront so they can lessen or even avoid problems similar to those encountered by the author. This would certainly contribute to the completion of their projects happily and tearlessly.

Paper

1. Introduction

I assume that all of you have an understanding of the definition of research, process of conducting a research project, research methods, as well as having a research topic to work with, and therefore I am going to skip discussing those areas. Rather, I would like to share my real life experiences, which I always call "extra-ordinary experiences," gained while conducting a research project as part of a Ph.D. course requirement during 1994-1998 at a prestigious university in Perth, Western Australia.

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2. Why do librarians need to do research?

Major tasks of librarians or information professionals are to provide the best services to meet their clienteles' needs. However, the needs of users are in a state of constant change because of various factors, such as changes in personal needs, roles in social life, especially work roles, and changes in the environment, e.g. work environment, socio-cultural environment and physical environment (Wilson, 1981, p4). Additionally, the application of information technology in library activities contributes to the changes in information-seeking behaviour patterns of the users. As research is a disciplined way of coming to know something about ourselves (Bouma, 1993, p5), librarians therefore need to do research in order to be aware of what is happening with their current and potential users in order to improve or reshape the existing services they already offer. As well, doing research is necessary into new services the librarians may plan to offer to their users to ensure that the new services are the right services for the target groups. Thus conducting research on a regular basis is very important for librarians to stay ahead in their profession.

3. Why do it overseas?

There are various reasons that may require librarians to do research outside their homeland. These include, for example, as part of requirements for completing higher degrees which are not available locally; unavailability of appropriate sample groups in their own countries; finding or accepting opportunities to conduct joint research projects with colleagues overseas as part of the collaboration between their parent universities; or even to meet their own personal needs of academic and professional fulfillment. This paper will focus on the first category : as part of the requirements for completing a higher degree, in this case a doctorate degree. It is also assumed that any such potential student candidates already have research topics to work on. In addition, all official procedures before the students were offered or qualify for places in overseas universities are not touched upon.

4. Challenges in doing research overseas

Various challenges actually arise as soon as students are offered places by interested universities. For starters, students had better make themselves familiar with the universities and the countries they are going to spend some time in. Thus they should find out as much information about those countries as possible, in terms of, for example, government, religions, culture, languages, weather, and ways of life. Familiarising themselves with the background knowledge about the countries will certainly contribute to their own peace of mind in that at least they know something, if only a little, about those countries.

On arrival in the particular country and at the start their project, a number of challenges confront an innocent abroad in conducting research overseas as I discovered. These include language barriers, academic problems, cultural differences, financial constraints, and emotional problems.

4.1 Language barriers

My experiences revealed that the language barriers, either for academic or social purposes, is the biggest challenge while studying overseas. This happens particularly to Thai students. Even though English is included as a second language from an early stage in the Thai education system, generally speaking, it is not widely used particularly in most provinces where there are not many English speaking foreigners. Additionally, I found the language barriers in Australia even harder than in other English speaking countries, because of the Aussie accent which is unique and can prove to be very difficult to understand, especially for new comers.

To tackle this problem, students have to keep their eyes, ears as well as their minds open to the new language. To become adapted, they should organise their time not only for studying but also for doing other activities, such as watching television, going to the movies and joining social functions. It is recommended that, regardless of your sufficiently high English test score, a one-semester-English-course at the early time in another country should be pursued. Such courses provide students with not only the language itself but also a gateway to the new culture, and give them some time to adjust themselves to the new country.

The language barriers also contribute to some difficulties in communication between students and their supervisors whom they have to see at least once a week particularly during the first year. Overseas students may feel uneasy to talking to them or asking about some academic problems because of this barrier. To deal with this, students should write their entire questions on paper and show this to the supervisors at the same time as they are trying to communicate with them. Students may need to ask the supervisors to write down any important points the supervisors have suggested as well. This strategy worked perfectly well with me.

4.2 Academic problems

Academic problems here refer to any kind of problem related to conducting the research project. These are some suggestions that may assist in alleviating this problem :

4.2.1 Thoroughly understand the research process

To be able to conduct a research project effectively, students should acquaint themselves with and thoroughly understand the whole process of doing a research project, as well as detail of each stage, for example, research methods available, samples and sampling, data collection, and how to analyse the collected data. This understanding would enable students to select the most appropriate methods to deal with their own research topics.

As doing research requires clear and disciplined thinking (Bouma, 1993, pii), the research proposal is the stage where students have to put all the ideas into written form to let others know what are they going to do. The research proposal should include and briefly describe the reasons for doing this research project, literature review, hypothesis/aims and objectives, research questions, sample groups and sampling, methodology, data analysis, funding, and time plan to be spent on each stage.

4.2.2 Make yourself clear and better understanding the research topic

4.2.2.1 Review literature

The study of available relevant literature enables students to determine how their projects may add to the current knowledge base and avoids duplication of effort in doing the same topics (Dane, 1990, p62). Additionally such literature review would provide background knowledge as well as enhance and broaden students' views about their topics. As it is difficult to determine how much literature to review (Creswell, 1994, p28), the researchers who know the topics the best should set up their own rules regarding this issue themselves. One may set up the rule that such a review should be done either within a limited time frame, for example doing within the first 6 months, or limit the range of publication years of information, e.g. not after 1999.

To be able to do literature review effectively, students should be aware of available information technology, such as Internet, search engines, other search tools, and CD-ROMs, as well as have the skills to handle them. In addition, they should be aware of existing software package that deal with literature, for example, EndNote Plus would be even better.

4.2.2.2 Writing a mind-map

As conducting research involves a process or a series of linked activities from beginning to end (Bouma, 1993, p7), writing a diagram or mind-map about the whole process at the start of the project is most necessary. The mind-map would assist students to understand each phase of the research process more clearly and thoroughly. Additionally, it enable students to clearly see the links between each stage as well as allowing them to design which phase should be done before which, according to their own style. Students can write the mind map either by hand or use some software packages for assistance. It is this map of students' own mind that they have to consult every time they have questions regarding their own work.

4.2.2.3 Discuss the topic

Discuss your research topic with lots of people, not just your supervisors. These include other staff members in the school you are studying, friends within the department, and friends outside your field as well as letting them know what project you are working on. I found discussion with friends very valuable. It not only made me understand my topic better but in the exchange I gained some interesting ideas. Additionally, when your friends come across information relevant to your project, they will either point you towards that information or even get it for you. From my experience, I received a number of interesting articles I would not normally have come across from friends and which I was able to cite in my projects.

Apart from discussion about the project, the students should discuss the problems they are confronting too. Talking to your supervisors or other staff members whenever you have any questions or even concerns is most useful. Please remember, there is no harm in asking.

4.2.2.4 Write down all ideas

The writing process is a thinking process, as Creswell (1994, p194) explained, while we are "rendering the ideas to paper, [we] can visualise the final product, 'see' how it looks on paper, and begin clarifying ideas". It is therefore recommended students write down all ideas out of each process of research, not just discussion, and work through several drafts of the paper, as Berg (1998, p267) suggested that more than one draft is necessary. I used to write an entire first draft not caring about how badly it was written, just followed the 'let-it-all-hang-out-on-the-first-draft' style, and then worked through them, draft after draft. Each draft, however, had an outline and structural component of ideas to be put in. The ideas were shifted, sorted and moved around in each draft till I was happy with them, and then worked on polishing sentences. Polishing sentences may be difficult for students whose English is not their first language. There may be, however, special English editors to deal with this matter for students requiring with some costs involved. If this is not possible, a native English speaker friend or colleague could be persuaded to read through the draft to make suggestions.

4.2.3 Keep up with what is happening in the profession

Before I went overseas, I had been working in a library in Thailand for 13 years. During that time, I just had to concentrate on my routine work and naturally I became rather out of touch with recent and continuing developments in the profession. Thus I was not up with the implications of information technology, and innovations such as the Internet activities.

When students are overseas, their supervisors may not aware of such problems and pay no attention to these issues. It is the students' job to let the supervisors know, and at the same time, to try to catch up with new things by various means, such as doing more reading, discussion with friends, and attending available relevant workshops, seminars, or conferences. Be aware that students have to find out the information about any workshop, seminar, or conference for themselves, do not wait for the supervisors to inform them.

Another useful way I used to handle this problem was to sit in on certain relevant course units offered either by the school I was enrolled in or other school within the university. Those

courses certainly assist students in catching up with many issues that you think you may be behind in.

4.2.4 Catch up with available software packages

Making yourself aware of and getting skills in using available software packages would assist you in producing the dissertation more easily and painlessly. These include software packages to deal with documents, tables, charts, as well as presentation. Additionally, some software packages that facilitate data analysis process, e.g. NUDIST and SPSS should be focused on as well. Universities normally offer short courses regarding these issues all year round. It is the students' own job to catch up with campus advertisements or news in order to join in them.

4.2.5 Doing other academic projects in between

It is not a good idea for students to pay attention only to their research project without thinking of doing something academically in between. Presenting papers related to the research projects in relevant conferences both locally and internationally is encouraged, valued and supported by universities. It is also the best opportunity and experience for the innocent abroad to meet, discuss and share ideas with other people who are in the same or related professions. National or international conference will also provide opportunities for participants to create personal networks so necessary for possible future collaborations.

Apart from presenting papers, the students should also attend conferences or workshops they are interested in. The registration fee for students is normally cheaper than other categories of participants. Again, the students need to find out about conferences or workshops themselves. They have to keep themselves up-to-date with current issues by reading journals in their field or related fields, become a member of newsgroups or discussion groups, and share information with friends on a regular basis.

4.3 Cultural problems

Cultural differences presented another challenge I confronted while studying in Australia which is a western-style, not eastern-style society like Thailand. Therefore, norms, beliefs, values, and ways of life are very different.

Thai people, or perhaps other Asians, have traditions of respect their teachers and always regard them as in a higher position, not in an equal social class. In fact, there is a wide cultural gaps of respect between teachers and students every where in Thai society. As a result, most Thai students are reluctant to talk or approach teachers, or in this case supervisors, when they have problems. They dare not express their real feelings or concerns, or make negative comments regarding their supervisors' suggestions or behaviour patterns. This issue may contribute to students bitterly accepting unpleasant situations however unintended caused by the supervisors while conducting their projects. It is therefore recommended that students should put their traditional cultural values toward supervisors aside when they experience any academic problems. They should approach the supervisors the way other local students do. Try to talk to the supervisors in the same way as you talk to your close friends. They are more than happy to help you. Do not forget, the supervisors are aware that they are dealing with people from different cultures as well, but they may not know how to approach overseas students either unless the students let them know. This can be a worthwhile two-way learning process.

Another thing concerning the Thai educational system that it is teacher-centred rather than student-centred. This contributes enormously to most Thai students getting used to doing as they are told or directed. Most of the students therefore have high expectations that their supervisors would ask them to do various things regarding their research projects. **They are not fully aware of the fact that researchers have to do the whole process themselves**, and the supervisors are just the ones the students can consult whenever they experience academic difficulties. It is most important to be aware of this and change your expectations of "spoon

feeding" prior to starting the project.

The University Counselor is another important issue I would like to raise. In Thailand, people do not normally go to see any counselor whenever they confront difficulties either in the work place or within family. Most of Thai people even regard the ones who go to see counselors as abnormal people. This beliefs is totally different from that in Australia. Australians, unlike Thai, regard counselor services as basic services offered to needy people every where. It is no exception in university communities which always have university counselors to assist students. Thus, whenever you have any problem, either personal, cultural or academic, and really need someone to talk to, please open your mind up and go to see the counselor. Having a record that you went to see the counselor will not only benefit your own peace of mind but also may assist academic matters. These include, for example, due to certain circumstances, you may be allowed to have another test, postpone the test, or expand the time of doing the research project, etc, all depending on your counselor's appraisal of your own unique problem.

4.4 Financial Constraints

Financial problems also contribute to difficulties while studying overseas if you do not come from a rich family or receive some sort of scholarship. The cost of living in Australia or other Western countries is much higher than that in Thailand. Holding a student type visa will limit your working time to certain hours. Thus it is difficult to conduct your research project as well as earn your living at the same time. Whether on scholarship or not, you have to spend your money wisely and value every cent.

However, there is a bright side. Being a Ph.D. student, you are entitled to some kinds of research funds available from the school. This funding will be made available to you each year during your enrollment time to assist in research-related activities, such as photocopying, inter library loan requests, or even attending useful workshops. Additionally, there are a number of grants offered world wide to Ph.D. students. Study their requirements and apply to them. Who knows? You may be a successful applicant!

There are also some ways to spend less money in Australia. Unlike Thailand, Australian culture regards second hand things as a good way to recycle used things. There are therefore various kinds of second hand shops available, such as bookshops, clothes and furniture shops, every where in Australia. You can buy things you need at a bargain price. You can sell them when you are about to leave the country.

4.5 Emotional problems

Emotional problems provide huge challenges that may discourage you and affect your studying. These include your own emotional problems, such as homesickness, feeling of being neglected, loss of former sense of identity and belongingness, loss of motivation, general discouragement and stress, as well as emotional problems related to other people, such as your family, your supervisor, and your friends. There is no single suggestion how to cope well with this issue because much depends on each individual.

However, my experience revealed that the best way to deal with this is to give yourself some time for relaxing, and to get away from what you are doing. These include going out with your friends, joining social functions, taking a break, taking holidays or doing something different from what you are doing occasionally. I used to find these activities very difficult to practice in the first two years of my studying, because I felt guilty every time my supervisor asked me to take a break or holiday. However, in my third year I tried as she suggested and I could see the difference in my work. I became accustomed to this habit and credit her for this worth while change.

5. Conclusion

Conducting research overseas is not limited only to first class honours students. There are always have opportunities for any person who is willing to work hard and has a high commitment. The task is not easy as there are many difficult challenges, as mentioned above. However, you can overcome such challenges as long as you are aware of and prepare for what is going to happen overseas. Doing research overseas may give researchers not only the degree they hope for but also may contribute to making them a more tolerant, flexible, and broad minded person.

While I was conducting my research project in Perth, Western Australia one of my colleagues used to tell me 'If you manage to finish a Ph.D. overseas, you can do almost every thing on earth'. I now have no doubt about it.

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Latest Revision: *June 7, 1999*

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